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ABSTRACT

At the heart of the recent drive for excellence and school reform is a call for stronger educational standards. The most ignored fact in the recent reports on excellence is that Black students are better prepared for this period of reform than ever before: Black students' test scores are improving nationwide; the gap between Black and White students' test scores is closing dramatically, though not at the expense of White students; and participation of Black students in demanding academic courses has increased significantly. Many organizations representing minorities have concerns about testing, assuming that if Black students perform less well, the test must be biased. First, test publishers must make sure that the test is indeed not biased; and if it is not, it should be used to focus public attention on unequal educational opportunities. Several recent trends should be considered warning signals: increasing high school dropout rates among Black students, declining enrollment of Black students in higher education, and the continuing gap between Black and White students' test scores. Vigilance is needed to ensure that the drive for excellence will protect and enhance the hard-won gains in equality of the last 30 years. (BW)

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EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS, TESTING AND EQUALITY

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The battle for civil rights does not end with victory in the courtroom. As the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund has demonstrated throughout its distinguished history, legal battles won are but the beginning. Sometimes more subtle inequities are uncovered; sometimes a new generation of unequal treatment is spawned. Frequently the task of implementing legal decisions proves to be more complex, time-consuming, costly and frustrating than even the most protracted litigation.

Nowhere is this more true than in public education. The goal of Brown v. Board of Education was constitutional fairness and educational quality. The yellow school bus was simply a means; the goal was better educational opportunity at the end of the bus ride.

Today we are experiencing nationwide ferment in the pursuit of better educational opportunity. Prestigious commissions are issuing reports calling for excellence and a war against perceived educational mediocrity. More than a hundred task forces, panels and committees are studying schools at the state and community levels. The goal of this ferment is better quality in education.

TM 840 372

Panel presentation at the Annual Civil Rights Institute of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund on "Brown v. Board of Education - 30 Years Later: The Politics of Excellence," New York City, May 17, 1984.

It remains to be seen if this drive for excellence will protect and enhance the hard-won gains in equality of the last 30 years. Experience counsels eternal vigilance to assure that the constitutional and educational rights of Black children are protected in this period of school reform.

At the heart of this drive for reform is a call for stronger educational standards. Parents, Black and White alike, want high standards for their children. "Don't sell my children short," parents are saying, "help them do better."

How to strengthen standards will be debated in state legislatures and school boards in the months and years ahead. The outcomes of these debates will determine whether this reform is for better or worse. What should the standards be? Who should be involved in determining them? How can children and teachers be helped to meet them? Will they be fair and how can they be assessed? What decisions will hinge on them? These will be the key questions that really determine both quality and equality in the drive for school reform.

Black Students Are Better Prepared for Educational Reform

The call for educational excellence is nationwide. This excellence must be for all, however. Excellence cannot become the new "code word" for a retreat from equality just when the struggles of recent years are beginning to pay off. The most ignored fact in the reports on excellence is that Black students are better prepared for

this period of reform than ever before. Thirty years after Brown, there is convincing evidence that progress in educational equality is bringing results in student performance. Let's look at some of this evidence:

- **Black students' test scores are improving.**

  The recent and much heralded turnaround in declining SAT scores is the result in large part of improved performance by Black students. Black mean scores on the SAT improved 7 points on the verbal part of the test and 15 points on the mathematical part between 1976 and 1983. On the more difficult College Board Achievement Tests, average scores for Black students increased 34 points compared to a decline of one point for all students.

  In the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Black students at the three age levels tested (9, 13, and 17) showed steady and consistent improvement in reading from 1970 to 1980. Mathematics scores for all students declined overall from 1972 to 1978 but scores for Black 9-year-olds improved, for Black 13-year-olds remained stable, and for Black 17-year-olds declined no more than those of White students.

- **The much-reported gap between Black and White students' test scores is closing dramatically.**

  In a seven-year period (1976 to 1983), mean score differences on the SAT between all students and Black students were reduced by 13 percent in the verbal and 16 percent on the mathematical parts of this nationally standardized college admissions test.

  On National Assessment reading exercises, results plotted by the children's year of birth show that Black-White differences have been cut in half -- from an average difference of 20 percent correct for those born in 1953 to an average difference of 10 percent correct for those born in 1970. (This method of comparison also reveals similar positive trends in NAEP mathematics assessments and in scores on the SAT and the Graduate Record Examinations.)[1]

- **Improvement in Black students' test scores is occurring nationwide, with best gains in the Southeast where school desegregation has had its greatest impact.**

  Black children in the Southeast have improved the most in National Assessment reading performance at the three ages tested. Greatest gains on National Assessment mathematics

[1] Lyle V. Jones, "White-Black Achievement Differences: The Narrowing Gap," Address to the Federation of Behavioral, Psychological and Cognitive Sciences, Washington, D.C, November 18, 1983, pp. 3, 6 and 7.

exercises were by Black fourth graders in the Southeast and Northeast, as well as by those in disadvantaged urban communities.

On the SAT, Black students' test scores have improved in every region of the country, with an above-average increase in the Southeast.

- **Participation of Black students in demanding academic courses has increased significantly.**

  The number of Black students taking College Board Advanced Placement tests has increased 82 percent in the last five years and their scores have been increasing. The percentage of Black SAT-takers in academic or college preparatory programs is 64 percent, an increase from 60 percent in 1980. From 1976 to 1983, the number of years of academic subjects taken in high school by Black SAT-takers has increased from 14.3 to 15.2 years. For most students, this added course was in mathematics or physical science. Between 1978 and 1982, Black enrollments in trigonometry, Algebra II and geometry increased by 3 percent and Black enrollments in computer science more than doubled to 11.3 percent, according to National Assessment data.

- **Contrary to fears raised in opposition to desegregation court orders, gains in Black student achievement have not been at the expense of White student achievement.** On National Assessment reading exercises from 1971 to 1980, average percentages of correct responses for White students at ages 13 and 17 remained stable while White 9-year-olds gave 3 percent more correct responses.[2] On mathematics and science exercises, White students at the three age levels demonstrated relative stability in performance during the 1970s.

  From 1980 to 1983, Black SAT verbal and mathematical mean scores both increased by 9 points and White SAT mean scores also increased, although by only 1 and 2 points respectively.

Pluses and Minuses of Testing in A Period of Reform

I know the concerns that organizations representing the interests of minorities in education have about testing. I share many of those concerns. My commitments to civil rights and educational justice over 25 years in public service have not changed now that I am in the private sector heading Educational Testing Service.

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[2] Jones, "White-Black Achievement Differences: The Narrowing Gap," p. 3.

But I also recognize that testing is important for improving education, including improving education for Black children.

- Test results provide a way that the public understands to monitor educational standards over time. They also help teachers and school officials to identify weaknesses in instruction and curriculum.

- Test results provide the information necessary for parents and others to keep pressure on communities, schools and educators to "close the gap" between Black and White student performance, a pressure that finally is bringing results.

- Test results document dramatically that federal programs such as Headstart and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have very positive long-term educational effects, and that poor children can and will learn when given the help and quality of instruction they need.

- Test results help parents and students to be more informed about academic performance and to shape educational plans for the future.

The greatest concern about tests is that they are unfair to and biased against minorities. Tests can be unfair and they can be biased. There is no doubt that examples of bias in the development of tests and in their use have been part of the history of educational measurement in the United States and abroad.

Such bias on the basis of race, sex or ethnic background is wrong. Bias must be guarded against and rooted out wherever it exists. I believe that test development organizations like Educational Testing Service have a fundamental and unavoidable responsibility to lead in the prevention of test bias.

In 1976, the NAACP issued a Report on Minority Testing. I have studied that report carefully and I support many of its recommendations. Indeed, my first public statement after coming to Educational Testing Service (in Congressional Testimony on November 4, 1981) called for an industry-wide Code of Fair Testing and an independent group to monitor it. This was a key recommendation in the NAACP Report.

ETS has not waited for other test development organizations to act in the cause of fair testing. Rather, it has acted unilaterally to carry out recommendations in the NAACP Report. We have established and publicly issued the ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness. These standards meet or exceed the Joint Technical Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing of the American Educational Research

Association, the American Psychological Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education. All ETS-developed tests are audited against these standards at least once every three years. This process is reviewed every year by a biracial Visiting Committee of independent experts and leaders whose complete report to the ETS Board of Trustees is released to the media. We deliberately have placed on this Visiting Committee representatives of organizations that in the past have been critical of testing generally and of ETS in particular.

New safeguards have been initiated by ETS in recent years to guard against bias in its tests. The development of a test form at ETS is a carefully monitored 18-month process. A sensitivity review of every test question in every test form is conducted as a mandatory step in the test development process. Specially trained ETS staff are responsible for assuring, to the best of their ability, that questions are not biased or stereotyped on the basis of race, sex or ethnicity.

In addition to this sensitivity review, ETS-developed tests are examined periodically to determine whether, from a statistical standpoint, any questions appear biased based on the race, sex or ethnicity of test-takers. Special research studies have been carried out with major tests, such as the SAT, to determine whether the tests measure the same abilities with the same precision for these different groups.

Much as I would wish it, no one can change that part of the history of educational measurement that has had unfair effects upon minorities in years past. But there is a solemn obligation, which ETS and I recognize and accept fully, to continue striving with all our power to protect against bias in standardized testing now and in the future. We also accept a responsibility to speak out publicly when tests get misused, as we have done in recent months with the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the State of Arkansas and the school district of Houston. It is my intent that Educational Testing Service be a strong and consistent force in the promotion of proper test use, as well as in proper test development. Hopefully, this sets an example for others in the testing field as well.

Differences in Test Results -- A Force for Improvement

Too frequently there is an assumption that if Black students perform less well on a test, the test must therefore be biased against Black students. First, we must be sure that the test indeed is not biased. But if it is not, then to attack testing because of unfavorable results is to attack a potential force for improving those results.

It does not cure a virus to throw away the thermometer reporting a fever. So it is with unequal educational opportunities. When I was Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, the State Board of Education wisely ruled that school district results on the state testing program should be reported yearly by race and ethnic group. The Board's

purpose in doing so was to focus public attention on unequal educational opportunities and to keep public pressure on this inequality until it was corrected.

I believe that publishing test results by race and ethnicity, nationally and in states and localities, has helped "close the gap." Black students are demonstrating that they can do well on tests if they get better educational opportunities. The encouraging results reported above offer hope that better educational opportunities are at last becoming a reality for some Black children. These results can be used to support the continuance of federal programs for the educationally disadvantaged and the earmarking of additional funds in state education-aid formulas for areas with high concentrations of educationally disadvantaged students.

Strengthening Educational Standards

There has been too much of a rush to testing in the early stages of the present reform effort. There is an old army saying that "If it moves, salute it; if it stands still, paint it!" Today, some reformers seem to be saying, "If it moves, test it!"

Tests do not define standards nor do higher qualifying scores. Properly used, tests measure approved educational standards that are defined in the curriculum of a school, school district or state.

Excellence will be possible only if educational standards are strengthened so that they are:

1. Based on what actually is taught to the student.

2. Introduced early enough so that the student and teacher have ample chance to improve learning before any decisions are made on promotion or graduation.

3. Accompanied by adequate help for the student and teacher so that they have a fair opportunity to succeed in meeting the strengthened standards.

There is no easy way to improve education. Shortcuts are illusory. As with any complex change, educational improvement requires clear priorities, careful planning, necessary resources, strong leadership and a realistic timetable. Reform also requires the involvement of those affected by the change if it is really to succeed. If we are to expect more of our children, we first must expect more of ourselves.

Taking Heed of Warning Signs

The pursuit of excellence through school reform cannot be judged in isolation from what is happening generally in education. There are some disturbing data that must alert us all in this period.

First, after steady and dramatic progress in the percentage of Black students graduating from high school over the past two decades, there are some signs that the dropout rate may be increasing slightly. Of the total Black population aged 18-21 years, the percent who are high school graduates decreased from 62.5 percent in 1982 to 61.0 percent in 1983.[3] While data for one year may not reflect a trend, I am concerned that the campaign for higher educational standards may create a "pushout" syndrome for high school students who lose hope, or whose teachers lose hope, that they can meet the new standards.

Second, significant gains in Black enrollment in higher education in the 1970s have begun to decline. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, by 1975 Black students constituted 10 percent of the nation's full-time undergraduates -- the same proportion of the 18- to 24-year-old population that Blacks represented. In that year, the proportion of Black high school graduates aged 18 to 24 enrolled in college increased to 32 percent, the same level as for Whites. By 1980, however, the proportion of Blacks had dropped to 28 percent while the rate for Whites stayed at 32 percent. Despite the earlier upsurge in Black undergraduate ranks, the number of full-time Black graduate students never did improve, remaining basically unchanged from 1972 to 1980 (21,000 and 22,100 students respectively).[4]

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[3]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1982, 1981. Department of Commerce. Washington, D.C., p. 49.

[4]National Center for Educational Statistics, "Participation of Black Students in Higher Education: A Statistical Profile from 1970-71 to 1980-81," U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 1983, pp. 4 and 7.

These discouraging figures, I believe, are not a by-product of the current educational reform movement. More likely they are the result of the economic hardships experienced by families in these recession-plagued years and of confusion over battles in Washington to cut federal student aid programs. Regardless of the cause, the current drive for excellence must be judged in part by the degree to which it restores equality of opportunity for higher education in the years immediately ahead.

Third, as encouraging as is the improvement in Black student performance on nationally standardized tests, important educational deficiencies remain and must be addressed. While the gap between Black and White students is narrowing, it still exists. While Black performance in basic skills has improved significantly, test results indicate that Black and White students have serious weaknesses in the so-called higher order learning skills such as problem solving and written expression. While great improvement is evident in the test performance of 9- and 13-year-olds, Black 17-year-olds have not improved nearly as much on National Assessment samples of the total eleventh grade population (including those who do not plan to attend college).

Conclusion

I end this paper as I began it: It remains to be seen if this drive for excellence will protect and enhance the hard-won gains in equality of the last 30 years. Experience counsels eternal vigilance.

I don't have to tell this audience that a conservative mood prevails across the country. The voices for justice and equality do not muster the numbers and vigor of the 1960s. But Black children again are helping us, this time not by courageously facing angry mobs but rather by demonstrating in cold, hard fact that they will learn more and learn better when given the same educational chance that in too many places is still reserved only for some.

Their improving performance sets the real challenge to be met by educational reform in the 1980s. Only if this standard is met will we know the full meaning of educational excellence.

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